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ABSTRACT

This digest describes cultural considerations and effective approaches for limited English proficient (LEP) individuals' workforce development, including the impact of recent training legislation. LEP persons often come from both a different language background and a very different cultural background; so English-language instruction must provide cultural and linguistic orientation. Four specific cultural factors may influence learner and teacher in the classroom: roles of learners and teachers; gender-related issues; appropriate topics for instruction; and appropriate behavior at school. One set of instructional approaches is used to provide English-language instruction: English as a second language (ESL), vocational ESL, and workplace literacy programs. Approaches to content-area instruction are bilingual/bicultural education, multilingual/multicultural approaches, "sheltered" content instruction, immersion, and submersion. Changes under the 1998 Perkins Act are provisions balancing greater state flexibility in administering, allocating federal funds with greater accountability for results, and allowing state and local agencies and programs increased flexibility. Given the Workforce Investment Act's (WIA's) recognition of the need for basic literacy, recurring aspects of the WIA system could be of benefit to LEP individuals, including Core Services and Training Services. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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by Michael E. Wonacott

ERIC DIGEST 2000
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Preparing Limited English Proficient Persons for the Workplace

Many individuals in today's workplace or preparing to enter it are limited English proficient (LEP). According to the 1998 Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, an "individual with limited English proficiency" is a secondary school student, adult, or out-of-school youth with limited ability to speak, read, write, or understand English and whose native language is not English or who lives in a family or community environment where a language other than English is dominant. LEP individuals come from a variety of social, economic, and educational backgrounds (Friedenberg 1995; Willette, Haub, and Tordella 1988). The literacy levels of LEP persons are equally diverse. Many claims of illiteracy among the LEP population refer only to literacy in English and ignore literacy in other languages. Likewise, an LEP person's oral proficiency in English should not be confused with English- or native-language literacy–that is, the ability to read and write (Wiley 1997). This *Digest* describes cultural considerations and effective approaches for LEP individuals' work force development, including the impact of recent training legislation.

Cultural Considerations for Effective Training

LEP persons–especially immigrants–often come not only from a different language background but also from a very different cultural background; so English-language instruction must often provide cultural as well as linguistic orientation. Immigrants in particular may experience profound adjustment or transformation in their social identity–all those aspects of the self (family role, life skills, sense of community, and so on) that define how people understand themselves in relation to others (Ullman 1997). Four specific cultural factors may influence learner and teacher in the classroom (McGroarty 1993):

- **Roles of learners and teachers**–Learners may expect more traditional, formal, authoritarian, ordered, structured instructional style and activities and be put off by informal practices such as using first names and moving freely around the room. Likewise, teachers may expect learners, especially adult learners, to be self-reliant, expressive, and assertive–a potential conflict with learners who are carefully deferential and reserved.
- **Gender-related issues**–Learners may expect different behavior from male and female teachers and may not even have experienced mixed-gender classes. Likewise, male-female issues might affect group configurations or activities. Finally, different definitions of appropriate gender roles can prevent or discourage LEP women from pursuing training.
- **Appropriate topics for instruction**–Topics that are innocuous to one person may violate social, dietary, or religious prohibitions for another. In addition, recent immigrants may have great difficulty describing the homes they fled in fear or answering personal questions that might have a bearing on their unresolved immigration status.
- **Appropriate behavior at school**–Different cultures define "appropriate" differently. Some learners may balk at moving classroom furniture or may expect a quiet, orderly classroom at all times. On the other hand, learners may expect to be able to eat, drink, smoke, or litter freely in the classroom.

Instructional Approaches

One set of instructional approaches is used to provide English-language instruction:

- **English as a Second Language (ESL)** covers all aspects of English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; survival or prevocational ESL tends to focus on English skills needed by immigrants to find housing, read want ads, use public transportation, and write (Platt et al. 1992).
- **Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL)**, on the other hand, focuses on the English skills specific to a particular occupation or vocational area. For maximum effectiveness, VESL instruction relies on collaboration between vocational and VESL instructors who work together to identify the specific oral and written English skills appropriate for the VESL course (Platt 1996).
- **Workplace literacy programs** upgrade current workers' English-language reading and writing skills. Workplace literacy programs can also serve LEP workers by providing workplace ESL instruction. A needs analysis first carefully identifies language skills needed to perform successfully in the employer's workplace; those language skills are then provided through classroom instruction (Grognet 1996).

Friedenberg (1995) identifies five approaches to content-area instruction:

- **Bilingual/bicultural education** provides content-area instruction to LEP students (usually all with the same native language) in their native language; ESL instruction is also provided at the same time. Over time, use of the native language for instruction is decreased and the use of English is increased.
- **Multilingual/multicultural approaches** provides limited content-area instruction in native languages when there are LEP students with different native languages in a class or when bilingual or multilingual teachers or aides are not available. The instructor becomes more a facilitator than a provider of instruction. ESL instruction is also provided at the same time.
- **"Sheltered" content instruction** uses English to provide content-area instruction but begins by first developing appropriate vocabulary by extensive use of visual aids, gestures, graphic organizers, and cooperative hands-on student activities. It is often used for classes with multiple language groups or multiple English proficiency levels or when bilingual teachers or aides are unavailable.
- **Immersion** is an approach used frequently but inconsistently, ranging from "carefully structured sheltered techniques with bilingual assistance to nothing more than submersion" (ibid, p. 44). In immersion, LEP students' native language is not used (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education 1996).
- **Submersion** provides no special services at all to LEP students–it's either sink or swim.

The LEP Population and the 1998 Perkins Act

How does the LEP population fare under the latest amendments to the Perkins Act? Some differences between the 1990 and 1998 acts related to the LEP population are superficial. In the 1990 act, for example, "individuals of limited English language proficiency" were one of five specifically identified special populations; the 1998 act includes "individuals with limited English proficiency" among a general "individuals with other barriers to educational achievement" (American Vocational Association 1998). The definition of an individual with limited English proficiency remains the same.

On the other hand, the new act continues a significant change in the emphasis given to serving special populations. The 1990 Perkins Act had strengthened provisions for providing education services to special populations (ibid.), in part by specifying a 10.5% set-aside for sex equity and programs serving single parents, single pregnant women, and displaced homemakers, as well as requiring each state to have a full-time sex equity coordinator (Hettinger 1999). At the same time, however, it eliminated some earlier funding set-asides for specific special populations, including the limited English proficient (Kochhar 1998). The 1998 act eliminated the 10.5% set-aside and the sex equity requirements.

Probably the most significant changes in the 1998 act are provisions balancing greater state flexibility in administering and allocating federal funds with greater accountability for results. The 1998 act allows state and local agencies and programs increased flexibility (e.g., in how they deliver services, whom they target, how they measure participation and progress of members of special populations) and changes in requirements (e.g., in the assurances for access and criteria for services to special populations) (Hettinger 1999; Kochhar 1998). States must now establish systems to monitor four core indicators (Hoachlander and Klein 1999) of student performance: (1) attainment of state-established academic and technical skill proficiencies; (2) acquisition of secondary or postsecondary diplomas, degrees, or credentials; (3) placement, retention, and completion of postsecondary education or advanced training or placement in the military or employment; and (4) participation in and completion of training leading to nontraditional employment.

Furthermore, states must individually define the specific indicators and performance levels for which they are accountable; so state success will depend on four factors (ibid.): (1) defining workable indicators and performance levels; (2) identifying relevant populations of students who participate significantly in career and technical education; (3) developing strategies for local implementation and local accountability; and (4) involving local personnel in state system design and helping local providers learn how to use performance measures.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998

Among the key elements of a work force development system, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) recognizes the need for "basic literacy as a key element of participation in the labor force and national life, especially in view of the large number of non-English-speaking adults in the workforce" (Kaufmann and Wills 1999, p. 9). And with an emphasis similar to that of the 1998 Perkins Act, the WIA gives the states new responsibility for sorting out how best to fulfill the targeting task. In line with this recognition of the need for basic literacy, the training provided under the WIA must be related to labor market needs but can combine literacy education with occupational training (ibid.).

Given the WIA's recognition of the need for basic literacy, recurring aspects of the WIA system could be of benefit to LEP individuals, even though they are not specifically targeted as a special population (Employment and Training Administration 1998a,b). For example, Core Services, available to all at one-stop centers with no eligibility requirements, include career counseling, information on skills needed for in-demand jobs, skill and needs assessment, and information about available services. The second level, Intensive Services, includes comprehensive and specialized assessments of skill levels (i.e., diagnostic testing); development of an individual training plan; group counseling; individual counseling and career planning; case management; and short-term prevocational services, which specifically include development of learning skills, communication skills, and interviewing skills to prepare individuals for unsubsidized employment or training.

At the highest level are Training Services directly linked to job opportunities in the local area and may include adult education and literacy activities in conjunction with other training. All in all, the WIA appears to offer a range of services designed specifically for work force development that would coincidentally meet the English-language instruction and literacy needs of the LEP population.

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